DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 124 668 UD 016 119

AUTHOR Wallace, Joan
TITLE The Black Family as Educator.
PUB DATE 16 Nov 75
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at Conference on Special Emerging Programs in Higher Education (Atlanta, Georgia, November 14, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS African Culture; American Culture; Cultural Factors; *Educational Problems; Family Characteristics; Family Influence; Family Problems; Family Relationship; *Family Role; *Family Structure; Negro Culture; *Negro Education; Negroes; Negro Role; *Negro Youth; Racial Discrimination; Racial Recognition; Racism; Self Concept; Social History; *Socialization

ABSTRACT

The black family is the primary socializing agent of the black child and, thus, the primary educator. The culture of blacks in America, in which the child is steeped, is unique, complex and rich-the result of a convergence and fusion of African, American, and European influences. In its education of the black child, the black family must deal, from beginning to end, with questions of racism and with questions deriving from racism. Today, most questions involving race in the raising of children still fall into the two main categories of how to deal with overt and covert racist expressions, and the resolution of questions of racial identity. Prime among the special problems facing the black family is the need to raise its children bi-culturally. The black child's bicultural experience is one of the ramifications of racism, and it is pivotal in his struggle for racial identity. Also central to the child's bicultural experience is language. The challenge to the black family, as mediator, as educator, is monumental; but its broader structure, its extended family, and its rich heritage can transcend racism, and produce bilingual, bicultural skilled Americans. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED124668

THE BLACK FAMILY AS EDUCATOR

JOAN WALLACE, Ph.D.
DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
FOR PROGRAMS
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE, INC.

MOREHOUSE COLLEGE
NOVEMBER 14, 1975

UD016119

One would not know from reading much of the literature that Black people, like other people, grow up in families. Black people, like other people, grow up in families.

This simple observation comes as a surprise to people who are accustomed to associating the experiences of Black people with slavery, crime, delinquency and civil disorders. White America tends to have a distorted perspective on Black life and the fact of Blacks growing up in families is a fresh perspective from which to understand the socio-cultural aspects of growing up Black.

The family is the matrix within which the child's biological, emotional and developmental needs are met, where his development, as an integrated person, is nurtured and where culture is transmitted. The family is the setting in which a child's basic trust, autonomy, initiative and sense of industry are developed. The interaction between societal needs and individual wants defines the family as a mediational setting, even though its structure is presently in transition, (as is the society in which the Black family exists). Any attempt to study child development as an autonomous process, independent of the family, is doomed to failure. The growth process of the child can only be understood within the context of the family which nurtures him.

The family provides the earliest and the most persistent influences encompassing the growing child, for whom the ways of the parents and other adults in the family are the only way of life the child knows. Subsequent experiences will modify these core influences but such experiences can never fully reshape or replace them. These core influences represent reality for the growing child and the subsequent construction of his social world is based on these primary realities.

Billingsley (1974) observes that "Black families are among the strongest and most resilient institutions in the nation. Were it not so, we would not have survived as a people and the national society would be even more inhuman and inhumane than it is."

The resiliency and strength of the Black family lie partially in its divergence from the patterns of family structure within the dominant group. Typically, within the Black family there are not only people who are related, within the same household, but also people who feel themselves to be closely related but who live in different households and sometimes in different locations. This is the extended family - these are significant others. This means that there are a number of adults who may be interested in and accept responsibility for his development, rather than just one mother and one father.

This intense feeling of being related within the extended family is, of course, an expression of the "we-feeling" in social life and its presence in the Black community is more than a reaction to past and present repression. It is also an expression of Black people's African heritage, in which an extended family is a central focus of community life. Hayes and Mendell (1973) found that Blacks interact more with their kin, receive more

help from their kin and have a greater number and more diversified types of relatives living with them than do white families.

The relentless forces of racism, poverty and violence of modern times continue to strain the Black family, but it responds with great strength. The skewed presentations of the Black family as weak, matriarchal, unstable, making no substantial contribution to either the Black community of the nation (e.g., Moynihan, 1965) are inexcusably ignorant accounts of a central institution in the Black experience.

The Black family is, of course, the primary socializing agent of the Black child and, is thus the primary educator. While good child-rearing principles may be seen by some as the same for all children because the basic needs of children are universal (Comer and Poussaint, 1975), the Black family faces many special questions in the raising of its children.

Prime among the special problems facing the Black family is the need to raise its children bi-culturally. The Black child must be, in the nature of things, bi-cultural. In the process of growing, the Black child must gain knowledge of his own family, knowledge of the Black community and knowledge of the larger society and how to negotiate with each. The process is highly complicated and the child's socio-psychological senses must be well honed from childhood through adolescence.

The culture of Blacks in America, in which the child must be steeped, is unique, complex and rich. It is the result of a convergence and fusion of African, American and European influences, characterized by a diversity of styles among individuals and families which are often overlooked or underrated by representatives of the dominant culture. The culture of a people is the totality of their way of life. It includes the basic conditions of their existence, their behavior, their life styles, their values, preferences and creative expressions of work and play. Black culture is a reality in which we have all been nurtured, although it is just beginning to be explored and documented, as such, in the literature.

Until very recently, it has been perversely argued that American Blacks do not have a distinctive culture. "The Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect." (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963:51). Even Mydral (1944) described the Black man as "an exaggerated American" whose culture is "merely a distorted development of a pathological condition" of American culture in general. Such observations are not only myopic, but they deny the humanity of an entire people.

The Black child, then, must learn (from his family) to deal with two parallel and sometimes opposing thought structures, each based on values, norms and beliefs of two cultures and supported by attitudes, feelings and the behavior structures of two peoples. Effective social functioning and environmental reality require that the growing Black child incorporate both patterns into his personality to insure competence in dealing with reality and as an impetus for transcending reality, i.e., moving beyond racism. Growing up healthy in America is a problem for any child, but the adaptations required for the healthy functioning of the Black child are particularly complex.

In its education of the Black child, the Black family must deal, from beginning to end, with questions of racism and with questions deriving from racism. In a time of transition, the Black family has to deal with cultural and racial questions that are different from those of the past and that will be different from those of the future. In the past, Black families had to train their sons, at all costs, to control their aggression in all contacts with whites for fear of lynching or death by other means. Things may appear to have changed considerably in that connection, although there are still situations in which Black youths would be wise to maintain their cool, i.e., certain police situations.

Today, most questions involving race in the raising of children still fall into two main categories: How to deal with racist expression, overt and covert; and the resolution of questions o racial identity. Jim Comer and Alex Poussaint, in their new book, "Black Child Care," comment on both subjects.

In the first instance, they state that there are healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with expressions of racism. The crux of the matter, they say, is the conservation of energy. In other words: meet the situation, do what you have to do, preserve your dignity, but don't overkill. "Overkill" is self-destructive and dissipates energy better utilized in the furtherance of your own interests. They note that some folk make a career of reacting to racism and use it to cover individual shortcomings. These patterns result from realities with which all Blacks can empathize, but they are not effective, in dealing with racism.

They discuss racial identity struggles in a number of contexts. I would like to quote the following:

"We are particularly concerned about the difficult racial identity struggles we are seeing in some Black youngsters completely isolated from whites and in those being told it is okay, even desirable, to 'get whitey.' At the other end (of the spectrum), is the Black youngster of mixed racial parentage, those with white features, and those living in predominantly white communities, or those with white families can have some very difficult identity problems."

"In adolescence, such youngsters often blame their parents from removing them from their people; for the fact that the only people they can have close relationships with or date - if they date at all - are white; for the fact that Blacks say, 'you are not Black.' We have even seen Black teens, from caring families with good incomes, become pimps, prostitutes and drug addicts in an effort to be Black or identify with the brothers and sisters. We have seen Blacks blame whites and racism as a cause for all of their problems and get hung up on hating whitey at the expense of their own personal development."

Fundamentally, then, it is in relation to racism and the resolution of the child's racial identity struggle that the raising of Black children differs from the raising of white children. Both questions have endless ramifications and impose profound demands on the Black family in educating its children, but Black families have shown much skill and strength in dealing with these questions. My view is that Black families must teach their children to separate racism and other external obstacles from internal obstacles. The question, "who controls my fate?" will give rise to appropriate behavior and attitudes. Racism needs to be seen as the racist person's problem. How one deals with it to obtain certain goals becomes my (the child's; the family's problem).

It is clear that Black families have demonstrated the manipulation of external adversaries and must continue to do so in addition to teaching the child to identify and use the resources around him. They must appeal to and reinforce the child's strengths, rather than always pointing to the child's weaknesses.

The Black child's bi-cultural experience is one of the ramifications of racism, as it is pivotal in his struggle for racial identity. Central to the child's bi-cultural experience, in turn, is language. Because the acquisition of language is central to the child's growth and because the acquisition of language is innate in human beings (virtually all children learn to speak), the complexities of language learning and the central importance of language to ego functioning are often overlooked.

To survive in this country, the Black child must learn the language of both his community and the dominant culture. In addition, he must learn varieties of behavior that are acceptable within his community and varieties of behavior that are acceptable within the wider society. As the languages and behaviors of the two cultures are sometimes mutually exclusive, he must learn the proper context for the utilization of each.

The bi-lingual, bi-cultural learning of a Black child (or of any child from a minority background) is a complicated and subtle task. Some children do not become bi-lingual and are able to communicate in only one language because their parents are monolingual (as,a matter of fact, are most white parents), because their schools and their experience are segregated, or, most likely, both. Barred by circumstance from learning the other language, some Black parents are unable to pass on to their children what they do not possess. Adding insult to injury, some educators proceed to label the Black child as verbally destitute.

Baratz and Baratz (1970), however, find that Black children of lower socio-economic background are neither linguistically impoverished nor cognitively underdeveloped, although their language system is different and presents a handicap in their attempts to negotiate in the standard English-speaking world. Nonetheless, such children speak a fully developed language that is more than adequate as a base for abstract thinking.

It is interesting to note, for instance, that a recent study of language in the Pittsburgh slums revealed that slum children there used 3,200 words not recognized by their teachers or by educational tests. The persistence of these idioms is illustrative of the cultural vitality (and cultural separateness) of the urban poor. Such linguistic vitality should offer a challenge to teachers just as the Spanish-speaking child's first language should be considered a linguistic asset rather than a linguistic handicap.

Clearly, however, society demands more of the minority child than it does of the middle class white child. A white child has only one language to learn; the Black child and the Spanish-speaking child have two. (Would it be interesting to suggest that every white child in the elementary grades be expected to do what every minority child is expected to do: i.e., master a new language in the elementary grades and to put down his first language as "bad English."

In addition to their language skills, Coles (1964) found that Black children from impoverished backgrounds both in the South and in the ghettos of the North, far from being emotionally blighted, as has been claimed, displayed resilience, toughness, ingenuity, exuberance and vitality. Such children come to school prepared to be active and vigorous, perhaps much more outgoing than the average middle class child.

In much of the recent literature, however, deviations from the ethnocentric norm are viewed as deprivations. "If your children don't have our kind of toys and talk our kind of language, they must be handicapped," runs the argument. In such instances, it is taken for granted that cultural departures from the middle class model mean cultural deficits.

During the 1960's, in conformity with this line of thought, the expression, "culturally deprived" became a code for poor Blacks. The concept of "cultural deprivation" places the emphasis on the psychological characteristics of the low level, cognitive style and emotional attributes. As one sociologist has observed, poverty is often discussed as if it were a personal trait rather than a social condition. The deficit model has been influential among educators to the detriment of Black children. Genuine understanding cannot grow out of simplistic formulae mechanically applied to complex phenomena. Unfortunately, the deficit model has encouraged such formulae. Difference is equated with deficit. A child should not have to be the same to be equal.

Above and beyond such issues, one must also question the presumption and arrogance of the premise that the white middle class way is a desirable one. At this point in history, it hardly needs stressing that established middle class mores are not providing a healthy basis for the flourishing of humanistic values. One can hardly pick up a book or article by a thoughtful observer of American politics without an anguished reminder of this truth.

In addition, the pre-occupation with psychological "deprivation" has dulled concern for those life deficits which do plague the lives of the poor, deficits in health and nutrition, housing, schools and job opportunities, deficits which urgently require correction. In the context of education, health and nutrition are of particular importance because so much that has been attributed to psychological deprivation has really been due to physiological factors.

As Birch and Gussow (1970) point out in their assessment of the effect of poverty on the intellectual potential of children, there has been a serious underestimation of the impact of poor health and nuttition on school failure. "The same homes," they say, "which lack toys and games are the homes in which hunger and disease abound." The focus on "cognitive understimulation" in such homes too often beclouds the central and urgent need for adequate food and medical care.

The fact is that proponents of the deficit model theory are playing a game of "blame the victim." Ryan (1971) says, "blaming the victim is an intellectual process whereby a social problem is analyzed in such a way that the causation is found to be in the qualities and characteristics of the victim rather than in any deficiencies or structural defects in the environment.

The Black family, as I have been at pains to stress, has a history, a culture and great strength. It goes without saying, however, that the Black family in America faces special problems in the education of its children and it would be a mistake to assume that these problems are met in the same way by all Black families. The dilemmas of socialization in a racist society are cruel.

Even in the Black middle class, Black parents can never give their children complete protection from racism, a problem which has no counterpart in the lives of white parents and their children. Black children, at the same time must relate to the second-class citizenship of their elders, see their elders demeaned in the eyes of the larger society, but believe in their elders and in themselves for the sake of their own healthy development. Lower class Black children receive less of the protection of the law, and are the least likely children in the United States to benefit from the general concern with child protection.

The standard concept of the protected and carefree child, common in the white community, has never been applicable to the majority of Black children, and the consequences of the powerlessness of Black parents means that they must devise their own patterns of child socialization, patterns primarily predicated upon the principle that children in the Black community must be taught to survive in a hostile society.

While one of Erikson's major contributions to psychoanalytic developmental psychology was his emphasis upon the critical importance of late adolescence. The Black child is frequently forced to grow up before he is legally adult. The youth whose father is a laborer and who leaves school at sixteen to take a semi-skilled job and marries at eighteen, has a very brief adolescence in contrast to a graduate student who is still undecided about his career at twenty-three, has another three or four years of study ahead of him and may still be considered an adolescent, since he is still unable to assume adult responsibilities at the level for which he is preparing. The Black adolescent girl faces the dilemma of being passive, soft and clinging, as the feminine role white America would bestow upon her, and being able, assertive, working alongside her man as survival dictates.

Yes, the challenge to the Black family, as mediator, as educator, is monumental, but it is clear that our broader structure, our extended family, our rich heritage can have produced strong and resilient children who can transcend racism, be bi-lingual, bi-cultural and skilled American citizens.

Perhaps, the young Black adult has a more difficult struggle in reaching adulthood - his path is strewn with difficulties, which always include racism and frequently, poverty - but in most cases, he has had the immeasurable benefits of a strong kinship network: a beautiful heritage, a rich and vital culture embodied in, and transmitted by, the loving Black family, the Black family as educator, the Black family as the socializing agent of the Black child.